Gut feeling checklist: the manipulation playbook decoded

Have you ever said something hurt you, and heard back *"You're too sensitive – it was just a joke"?* This is a tactic emotional abusers use to assert control over others by instilling shame.

They first earn your trust, then slowly erode your self-worth until two things happen: 1. Your trust in *yourself* becomes weaker than your trust in *them*, so you start **depending on their approval** when making decisions. 2. Your care gets turned against you: you start equating boundaries with hurting others, and because you don't want to hurt anyone, you **blame yourself instead of setting boundaries** when something feels wrong. Once they get bored or extract everything they find "valuable" about you, they throw you away like a used toy.

Manipulation is about turning your strengths into traps. Once you understand their tactics and start trusting your gut again, no manipulation can reach you – whether it comes from a boss, colleague, family member, partner, or friend.

1. **IDEALIZATION** – creating an illusion of mutual trust to bypass your natural defences.

a. **Love bombing**: Overwhelming you with intense and frequent affection, attention, or gifts to make you feel special and lower your guard, and to create leverage for later demands.
Gut feeling check: Affection feels intense but vague, you start feeling pressure to live up to it.

b. **Mirroring**: Copying your interests, values, and emotions to create instant similarity and trust, so you share your vulnerabilities, which they can later use for control.
Gut feeling check: They seem "just like you" almost immediately – same tastes, same worldview, same dreams. It feels like talking to a reflection, not another person.

c. **Positive reinforcement**: Giving praise, affection or rewards only when you behave the way they want, as a way to train you into compliance.
Gut feeling check: Approval or rewards appear only when you act as they like and disappear when you assert yourself. You start monitoring your behaviour to keep the peace.

d. **Future faking**: Making big promises about what's coming (a promotion, a project, a family…) to keep you hopeful and loyal, without ever following through.
Gut feeling check: From all the big promises, only small gestures occasionally materialize.

e. **Boundary pushing**: Moving faster than you're ready for or testing limits until saying *no* feels uncomfortable to normalize control and make refusal feel uncomfortable.
Gut feeling check: Each request is small, but over time, your comfort zone shrinks. When you do say no, they act hurt or confused instead of respectful.

Is someone genuinely being kind or are they just trying to create an illusion of trust? Ask yourself: *how hard is it to say no to them* -> if that makes you feel guilty, be on your guard.

2. **DEVALUATION –** systematic offensive on your reality, self-worth, support network and independence to control you and make you dependent on their approval.

2A. **ATTACKING YOUR REALITY (GASLIGHTING)**

a. **DARVO**: A tactic where the manipulator denies their actions, attacks or blames you, and makes themselves out as the victim, so you end up feeling like you're the abuser. It turns your attempt to stand up for yourself into "proof" you're the problem. The aim is to destroy your confidence so they can preserve control and hide the truth.
Gut feeling check: You try to set a boundary or bring up something that hurt you, and suddenly you're defending yourself instead. You leave the conversation confused, ashamed, or doubting your memory. You apologize and feel bad for things you didn't do.

b. **Minimization**: Dismissing your emotions or experiences to make you doubt their importance with phrases like *"You're too sensitive"* or *"Others have it worse."* The goal is to shrink your emotional confidence until you stop trusting your gut and start accepting their version of what matters.
Gut feeling check: You replay moments in your head, wondering if you really did overreact. When you share hurt and they mock you instead of listening, you feel smaller each time, until silence feels safer than honesty. You start to think you really are difficult, spoiled, too sensitive, that you can't take a joke…

c. **Diversion**: Shifting the subject, overloading the conversation with contradictions, or shutting down communication completely to avoid accountability.
Gut feeling check: You leave conversations drained, dizzy, and unsure what the argument was even about. You start rehearsing your words before speaking, afraid they'll twist or ignore them. No matter how calmly you explain, the discussion never lands.

d. **Justification**: Using excuses to avoid accountability. Instead of clarifying, it reframes hurtful or irresponsible behaviour as normal, understandable, or even caring. Over time, these excuses sink in until you start repeating them yourself, believing the harm was your fault or something you deserved.
Gut feeling check: You find yourself defending their behaviour to others or to yourself. You hear their excuses echo in your head and feel guilty for being upset. Deep down, you sense that nothing ever changes, but you keep waiting, hoping next time will be different.

e. **Lying**: Manipulators lie to protect their ego, control others, and escape accountability. Their stories mix just enough truth to sound believable, leaving you piecing events together like a detective.
Gut feeling check: You find yourself double-checking conversations and screenshots just to feel sane. Simple questions trigger their hostility, and their explanations never add up. Deep down, you feel that something is off, but you start trusting their words more than yours.

2B. **ATTACKING YOUR EMOTIONAL CORE**

a. **Guilt tripping**: Turning kindness into debt to pressure you into compliance. Sometimes it's unconscious insecurity, but in manipulation it's deliberate. The goal is to weaponize loyalty and generosity to keep you feeling guilty until you give in.
Gut feeling check: You feel uneasy when people do you favours, as if payback is expected. Saying no feels cruel or unfair, so you give in even when you don't want to.

b. **Humiliation**: A power play that uses insults, mockery, and public shaming to make you feel small while masking the abuser's own insecurity. By spotlighting your "flaws" and minimizing your worth, they protect their fragile ego and test what wounds you. The goal is to crush confidence and establish dominance through shame.
Gut feeling check: You feel a flash of shame when they make jokes at your expense. You laugh it off to avoid more ridicule, but part of you shrinks each time. Over time, you stop sharing what matters to you and start believing you really are what their jokes imply.

c. **Trauma bonding**: Randomly cycling between cruelty and kindness to create an addiction-like attachment through intermittent reinforcement. It's the mechanism slot machines use – the rewards are random and they make you think "if I keep playing, I'm bound to get the reward". The power imbalance and unpredictability make you chase relief, and a constant roller coaster of emotions creates a chemical dependence.
Gut feeling check: You know it is harmful, yet you can't let go. You cling to rare good moments and explain away or forget the bad. You walk on eggshells and crave their approval to feel calm. You believe promises of change that never last. Time apart brings anxiety and withdrawal-like symptoms.

d. **Slow erosion**: Gradual, targeted pressure on your vulnerabilities (things that hurt you or matter to you the most) that drains your strength and erodes resistance by provoking, arguing, and ignoring boundaries. The goal is to exhaust you into helplessness, resignation, and numbness.
Gut feeling check: You feel ridiculed for your hobbies, beliefs, ambitions or identity as a whole, so you start hiding it. You feel resigned, as if no amount of explaining or defending ever changes anything. Saying no feels dangerous, and silence starts to feel safer than trying. Deep down you know something is wrong, but you're too drained to fight it.

e. **Intimidation**: Using rage, threats, and physical violence to trigger your automatic survival responses (freeze, fawn) so you stay silent, comply, and stop resisting. The aim is simple: create fear that makes leaving or objecting feel dangerous.
Gut feeling check: You flinch at sudden movements or loud tones. Your chest tightens, breath shortens, and you freeze instead of speaking. Doors slam, walls shake, objects break. You avoid eye contact, stay quiet, and move carefully as if your body has learned that stillness might keep you safe. But you don't really feel safe.

2C. **ATTACKING YOUR SUPPORT NETWORK**

a. **Triangulation**: Bringing a third person into the dynamic to control perception, create competition, or validate the manipulator's version of events. The goal is to make you feel insecure and replaceable while keeping you off-balance and constantly seeking their approval.
Gut feeling check: You notice tension and comparison where there used to be trust. You start competing for attention or validation that once felt effortless, sensing that someone else's name now hangs between you.

b. **Discouraging outside contact**: Gradually undermining or discouraging your relationships with others to make outside support seem distant or unsafe. The goal is to isolate you through subtle doubt and time monopolization until they become your main emotional anchor.
Gut feeling check: Friends start to feel less trustworthy, social plans fade, and you hear small comments that make you question people's intentions. Your world slowly shrinks until one person feels like the only safe option.

c. **Smear campaign**: Spreading lies and distortions behind your back to damage credibility, rewrite social reality, and isolate you from support. The goal is to turn others against you while they appear innocent, heroic or the victim.
Gut feeling check: People you counted on grow distant or act strangely. You sense conversations happening without you, and explaining yourself only seems to make things worse. You feel erased by a false version of yourself that others now believe.

2D. **ATTACKING YOUR INDEPENDENCY**

a. **Material control**: Restricting or taking control over access to money, housing, work, or possessions to create dependency. The manipulator may hide income, control spending, withhold resources, or tie basic needs to obedience so that survival depends on their approval. The goal is to replace mutual support with ownership.
Gut feeling check: You feel anxious about money or basic needs even when you've earned them. You second-guess every purchase or request, permission replaces freedom, and leaving feels impossible because you no longer have the means to stand on your own.

b. **Surveillance**: Monitoring your movements, communications, or social life to maintain control. It can look like tracking devices, constant "check-ins," shared accounts, or people reporting back to them. The aim is to make you feel constantly observed and unsafe to act freely.
Gut feeling check: You feel watched even when you're alone. You start censoring what you say, where you go, and who you meet. Every normal choice feels risky, and you forget how privacy feels.

c. **Institutional abuse**: Using systems like workplaces, courts, or authorities as tools of domination. The manipulator twists rules, files false claims, or exploits bureaucracy and social expectations to discredit, punish, or corner you publicly.
Gut feeling check: You feel trapped by rules meant to protect you. Every attempt to defend yourself backfires, and official processes that should bring justice instead deepen your fear and helplessness.

3. **DISCARD** – withdrawal of connection once you are depleted of what they find valuable, often followed by attempts to re-initiate the abuse cycle.

a. **Emotional cutoff**: Shutting down all communication and/or affection to punish, control, or erase you. The goal is to make you chase contact for relief while they gain power by withholding it.
Gut feeling check: You feel invisible and desperate to fix what you don't understand. Messages stay unanswered, the air feels cold, attempts to reconnect make you feel smaller.

b. **Replacement**: Moving on before closure and flaunting a new person to restore their ego, prove superiority, and make you feel worthless. The goal is to show how easily you can be replaced and make you question your value.
Gut feeling check: You feel jealous and start wishing what once was would come back. You feel inadequate and disposable, wondering how they moved on so quickly.

c. **Character assassination**: Destroying your reputation through lies and distortions to protect their image and punish you for leaving or exposing them. They twist facts, play the victim, and recruit others to spread their narrative.
Gut feeling check: Friends grow distant, rumours surface, and your truth feels powerless. You feel erased, misunderstood, and alone.

d. **Hoovering**: Reaching back after discard with charm, guilt, or false vulnerability to pull you back into the cycle. The goal is reassuring themselves they still have power over you.
Gut feeling check: You feel a flicker of hope when they reappear – maybe they've changed. Their words sound softer, even apologetic, yet something in your body tightens. A mix of guilt, hope, pity, nostalgia, and fear pulls you back towards them.

Manipulation isn't loud or obvious. It often hides behind care, charm, or concern. Your gut knows before your mind can explain it. Stay connected to your feelings, be discerning with trust, and build strong self-worth and supportive connections. Don't become dependent on others' approval and learn to say "no" without guilt. That way, no one will be able to manipulate you. And if someone has manipulated you in the past, remember: it's not your fault. Manipulation is designed to go unnoticed and slip past even the strongest defences.